Interview with Dr. Roy Lyster

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Thank you to Dr. Roy Lyster for accepting our invitation for SLS Working Papers. Dr. Lyster is Professor of Second Language Education, Department of Integrated Studies in Education, at McGill University. His research interests include second language acquisition in classroom settings in general, with a specific focus on immersion and content-based classrooms, more specifically, teacher-student interaction, form-focused instruction, and corrective feedback. He came to Michigan State University to give a talk at Second Language Research Forum. The interview was conducted by Seongmee Ahn on November 1, 2009. For more information about Dr. Lyster, please visit his faculty page: http://people.mcgill.ca/roy.lyster/.

Seongmee: How did you become interested in second language research?

Dr. Lyster: I’ve always been interested in languages and am a second language learner myself. I grew up in Saskatchewan, Canada. It’s monolingual English, but I became interested in French. I studied with the audio-lingual method in elementary school and then, in high school, I became really good at it. I went on a student exchange in Quebec City where I was fascinated to learn about a vibrant culture other than Anglo-American culture. I became committed to becoming fluent in French. My bachelor’s degree is in French language and literature. I got a scholarship from the French government to do an MA in French literature, and I lived in Paris for three years. When I came back to Canada in the early eighties, I settled in Toronto where immersion was a really big thing. Everybody said, “If you could get your teaching degree, you could start teaching in immersion.” So, I did that and got a job in French immersion, which I did for almost ten years. During that time, I started my master’s degree at OISE. I worked with people, like Birgit Harley, Merrill Swain, Sharon Lapkin, and Jim Cummins. I loved doing my master’s, because I found it very interesting to be a teacher in immersion. I did night courses for my master’s, which helped me reflect on my teaching and understand theoretically better why my students spoke the way they did. Through my PhD dissertation, I became interested in research. All sorts of questions started to arise concerning immersion like, “How do you teach a language at the same time as teaching content?” Those questions helped me stumble across corrective feedback because it seems to be quite central. We used to think that feedback was just kind of the tip of the iceberg or icing on the cake, but I actually think it’s fundamental.

Seongmee: Why are you interested in classroom-based research?
**Dr. Lyster:** I was a teacher for ten years, but I had many questions about my teaching effectiveness. There wasn’t much guidance about how to teach language in an immersion context so I became interested in different models of instructional intervention. Now I work at a faculty of education, doing teacher training, so I am still interested in pedagogy and working with teachers in classrooms. Lab studies have really fallen short of giving sufficient information about language learning in classroom settings.

**Seongmee:** What advice would you give to language teachers about how best to provide corrective feedback in their language classrooms?

**Dr. Lyster:** Feel confident when giving corrective feedback. Don’t worry about its effectiveness as the evidence is clear that providing feedback in classrooms is more effective than not. Many teachers feel that students don’t want feedback because it hurts students’ feelings, but a lot of research shows that students want to receive feedback. Create contexts that are meaningful enough for the feedback to be useful and effective. In terms of feedback types, with younger learners, don’t use much explicit, metalinguistic explanation, although older learners might like that. Research shows that prompting is probably more effective, but you can only prompt learners in what they’ve already begun to acquire. So, you have to make online decisions about the level that your students are at. If you know that your questions are beyond your students’ interlanguage development, then it’s a perfect time to use recasts, but don’t overuse recasts. It takes less time to prompt than people suggest. It can be very expeditious to give short prompts, trying to push learners to self-repair.

**Seongmee:** Would you have any advice for graduate students to become a competent SLS researcher?

**Dr. Lyster:** Good students have to be well-read and delve into all sorts of theories and theoretical perspectives. You need to do empirical research and draw on a range of theoretical orientations to help you interpret and understand your results. Too many researchers are driven by one theoretical orientation and design their study to justify it. You need to set up a study that allows you to keep the possibilities open and draw on theory afterwards to interpret data.

**Seongmee:** Could you please tell us about your current projects or initiatives?

**Dr. Lyster:** I’m in-between projects. I’ve completed a bilingual read-aloud research project with Laura Collins in immersion classrooms in Montreal. It’s being published in *Language Awareness*. I’m trying to continue in that classroom-based vein. I’m working on a pedagogical project with teachers in a French immersion school. I’m trying to have the English and French teachers of the same students collaborate, which they normally don’t do. I’m convinced that, for content-based language instruction to be effective, the teachers of both languages need to work together. In feedback, I work more and more with my students. I’m hoping to work more with Kazuya Saito who’s interested in feedback and its role in pronunciation teaching. I finished an interesting study with Yingli Yang. It will be coming out in *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* where we did a feedback study, a classroom intervention study, basically comparing no feedback, prompts, and recasts, but in a Chinese EFL context. I’m interested in doing more research in a foreign language context, not just immersion settings in Canada. I’m
counting on my international students to take me in new directions.

Seongmee: Would you tell us about some research gaps or future directions, specifically in corrective feedback, or generally in second language research?

Dr. Lyster: There’s still more research to be done on corrective feedback. But, in SLS research, I’m more interested in going beyond the input-output interaction model. I’m interested in feedback, practice, and the role of output, which is insufficiently explored. When Swain proposed the output hypothesis, research moved more towards meta-talk and the use of language to talk about a language. It’s interesting to come back to the role of output in developing fluency through practice. So, I’m interested in how feedback and practice can work in tandem effectively in classroom settings and trying to move away from the idea that has dominated SLS research that learning should be implicit. I don’t think there is sufficient evidence that we learn languages best implicitly, certainly not in classroom situations. I don’t know that explicit instruction is the best, but I would like us to move away from the idea of demonstrating through research that focus-on-form has to be implicit. I hope we can look at the role of practice and output in the context of communicative and content-based instruction. Content-based instruction is the future of language teaching, which is what I’d like to see for classroom SLS research.

Seongmee: Do you have additional comments you would like to make before we end our interview?

Dr. Lyster: I haven’t been in SLRF for quite a while. I was here for SLRF in 1997 and then at Columbia University in 2005. Anyway, I really enjoyed the conference, and I think that it seems like an interesting student body. I loved the venue. This is a great place for a conference. I think that the students did a really good job. So, I would just like to say, “Congratulations!”

Seongmee: Thank you for your kind words and agreeing to interview for SLS Working Papers. It was a great pleasure to talk with you.

Dr. Lyster: Thank you. It was fun for me.